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SUBJECT: DEMINNG SRI LANKA'S NORTH - IMPRESSIONS FROM THE FIELD

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) recently decided to begin de-mining operations in the Manthai West Division of Mannar District, one of five districts in the Northern Province and the scene of heavy fighting last year, when Government forces pushed the LTTE northward into the Vanni. Manthai West Division includes the Rice Bowl - an area of more than 120 square kilometers that, because of its fertility and extensive irrigation system, has traditionally been a major rice producer. For the Rice Bowl, in April, the GSL's Ministry of Nation Building issued de-mining task orders to the Sri Lankan Army (SLA), which has a de-mining unit, and to four international NGOs - Horizon (Indian), Sarvatra (Indian), Mine Action Group (MAG--British), and Fondation Suisse de Deminage (FSD--Swiss). On May 18-22, a USAID/Sri Lanka official traveled to Mannar District to observe the commencement of Rice Bowl operations by MAG and FSD. He also traveled to another division in Mannar - Musalli - to see ongoing de-mining operations of FSD and to talk to the first group of returnees in Sri Lanka's North, since the winding down of the conflict. End SUMMARY.

The Rice Bowl

¶2. (SBU) Mannar District's Manthai West Division once had over 90 villages and hamlets, sprinkled over an area covering approximately 500 square kilometers. It is an area of fertile paddy fields, irrigated by a system of 153 major and minor tanks (reservoirs) and canals. Fishing is the second most important livelihood. According to provincial government records, over 26,000 people lived in the division in 2007.

¶3. (SBU) For many years, a forward defense line bifurcated the division, separating government and LTTE forces. The forward defense line was heavily mined by the SLA. The LTTE also mined a series of defensive earthworks. In late 2007 and 2008, the SLA and LTTE engaged in fierce battles, as Government forces slowly pushed the rebels northward through the Manthai Division of Mannar District. As Government forces moved north and eventually eastward, civilians fled their villages, withdrawing with the LTTE until, by 2009, they were amassed in a final conflict zone along the coast of the District of Mullaitivu. Completely depopulated except for

soldiers of the SLA, no livelihood activities have taken place in Manthai West and the Rice Bowl for more than one year. Paddy fields are overgrown with weeds, and there is extensive infrastructure destruction, including damaged tank bunds (earthen dams) and canals. FSD estimates that, until initial assessments are conducted, 86 square kilometers of Manthai West - including large sections of the Rice Bowl, the main north-south road in the division, and areas in the eastern sector -- should be considered high risk for mine contamination.

¶4. (SBU) As the conflict entered its final phase in April along the northeastern coast of the country (Mullaithivu District), the GSL decided to begin returning displaced persons to their homes along the northwestern coast (Mannar District), once security and other conditions permitted. A small number of families returned to Mannar District's Musalli Division at the end of April, after three de-mining NGOs completed task orders for 13 of 15 coastal villages. Apparently eager to show the international community that it is serious about returns, the GSL next issued task orders for de-mining to take place in Manthai West, which is an area of economic importance and home to approximately ten percent of the current IDP population from the Vanni. According to plans, half the Rice Bowl area is to be de-mined by the SLA, with de-mining NGOs ("agencies") given the other half.

Lack of Information on Minefields

¶5. (SBU) The SLA has cleared some access roads into Manthai West, but many remain un-cleared and are therefore "no-go." Neither MAG nor FSD have been able to see any SLA minefield maps. Since the SLA rotates soldiers every six months out of assigned areas, the current army contingent assigned to the Rice Bowl has no first-hand knowledge of SLA mining. Nonetheless, some minefields are known, or easily deducible (for example, along the northern side of the forward defense line). When it comes to LTTE minefields, information is provided by soldiers who have come across mines, but otherwise little is known. Over the past year, tens of soldiers have been injured in Manthai West, making them reluctant to stray off known cleared paths. Besides strategically placing mines to slow advancing troops, the LTTE is known to have randomly laid small clusters of "nuisance mines," making minefield detection all the more difficult. To assist with the initial assessment process, de-mining agencies hope eventually to have access to IDPs -- now in camps -- who used to live in former LTTE-controlled territory. Otherwise, the only information about the location of LTTE mines appears anecdotal, supplied by soldiers who find UXO or come across mines during their patrols.

MAG and FSD Operations

¶6. (SBU) Without special permission from the Ministry of Defense and army commanders on the ground, civilians are not allowed beyond a checkpoint just north of the former forward defense line. This is due to the presence of mines, as well as to concerns by the GSL that remnants of terrorist cells remain.

¶7. (SBU) On May 18 -22, a USAID/Sri Lanka official visited two de-mining agencies' operations in Mannar District - those of MAG and FSD. Of the four agencies issued task orders for the Rice Bowl, only MAG has commenced operations, having been on the ground for nine days at the time of the USAID visit. FSD will have its demining team in place by the end of May.

¶8. (SBU) After a safety briefing on site, the USAID official walked and drove the perimeter of much of the ten-square kilometer sector allocated by task order to MAG. He observed use of MAG's flail machine, which loosens the terrain to a depth of fifteen centimeters, followed by manual deminers who inspect the churned-up trail. He also observed manual de-mining - a painstaking task whereby each deminer clips vegetation and meticulously rakes and inspects the soil.

¶9. (SBU) With the MAG field operations manager, he visited the village of Palaikulai, containing 385 houses where 1,540 people once lived. This area was primarily for paddy cultivation and livestock. At present, there is evidence of old paddy fields, but no

livestock. Houses and public buildings are mostly destroyed.

¶10. (SBU) In its first nine days of operations in the Rice Bowl, MAG had covered 5,314 square meters by machine and a ten-man manual demining team, finding one Claymore mine, one 8 mm mine, and various UXO. MAG is using one flail machine alongside a ten-man team. At its current asset level (73 employees split between Rice Bowl and ongoing tasks in Batticaloa District), MAG will need several weeks to clear part of Palaikulai village. If additional funding and work is forthcoming, MAG is ready to work up estimates for expanding operations by hiring more deminers and procuring additional flail machines (estimated at \$400,000 new).

¶11. (SBU) The following day, the USAID official returned to the Rice Bowl, this time with the FSD field operations manager. They walked and drove the perimeter of much of the six-kilometer square area tasked to FSD. Using an expensive (\$25,000 each) laser-guided binocular, they were able to spot a mine at the edge of a rice paddy, along a former LTTE defensive bund, and see how MAG uses high-tech to map important landmarks of the area assessed. As part of its standard demining dossier, MAG uses GPS mapping to plot the location and condition of roads, wells, tank bunds, houses, schools, hospitals, and other infrastructure. This mapping should prove invaluable to Government and donor organizations as they assess the need for reconstruction and rehabilitation of infrastructure, in support of a GSL returns/resettlement strategy.

Visit to Musalli Division

¶12. (SBU) After visiting the Rice Bowl, the USAID official and FSD field operations manager visited the Musalli Division to see first-hand ongoing de-mining operations and to get a sense of the progress made by the 107 families that had been returned to Saverupuram Village with fanfare on April 30th. FSD, under great pressure from the Mannar Government Agent, hopes to have its last Musalli Division village de-mined by the end of July. FSD de-mining operations followed strict protocols, with a focus on houses and other landowner property (latrines, wells). FSD's de-mining operation for Saverupuram village covers three sectors, including a former LTTE Sea Tigers launching base that will provide access for this fishing village to the sea.

¶13. (SBU) With no evidence of fighting (as opposed to heavy fighting and destruction in the Rice Bowl), the general condition of houses and public buildings in Musalli Division is good. The USAID official was able to talk with a number of officials and resettled IDPs about the challenges they face, including potable water, health issues (scabies and respiratory illness), malnutrition, the need for teachers and school furniture and supplies, and limited access (for security reasons) by fishermen to the sea.

De-Mining and the Way Forward

¶14. (SBU) The GSL has not released a de-mining strategy for the North. Rather, de-mining tasks have been issued in a piecemeal fashion. After three de-mining agencies were issued task orders for 15 coastal villages (only two of which were found to be contaminated) in Musalli Division, the GSL decided to issue task orders for the Rice Bowl of Manthai West Division.

¶15. (SBU) De-mining agencies prefer to have enough work so that they can work in areas simultaneously in multiple stages. In the first stage, they do a general mine action assessment -- with the help of the local population -- to determine areas that can be declared "low risk" and safe for re-settlement/returns. If there is evidence of possible mine or UXO contamination, the agencies conduct a technical survey that enables them to narrow down and demarcate the presence of minefields and UXO. The demarcated areas can then be cleared, or put aside for later clearance, while the agencies continue the assessment and technical survey stages in other locations, thereby identifying and certifying additional area as low risk for re-settlement.

¶16. (SBU) A de-mining strategy for the North should actually be a sub-set of an overall returns strategy for the North. However, the GSL has so far been reluctant to disclose its plans concerning the

locations, timing, and numbers of IDPs it expects to return. Without a returns strategy, and a concurrent de-mining strategy, progress will continue to be piecemeal. Without a strategy, it is harder for donors to program resources and impossible for demining agencies to work faster and more efficiently (hiring more staff, obtaining more capital assets).

One Possible Scenario for the Rice Bowl

¶17. (SBU) As an exercise to support resettlement/returns, FSD developed a rough estimate of the time and cost to de-mine the entire Manthai West Division. Using assumptions of increased manpower (demining teams) and capital equipment (more flail machines and other customized equipment that would expedite the technical survey process), FSD estimates that it would take 12 months to cover the entire division. Depending on the level of contamination discovered, one scenario (2.5 percent contamination) would cost approximately \$9 million, and a second scenario (5 percent contamination) would cost approximately \$15 million.

¶18. CONCLUSIONS

-- Both MAG and FSD would like to expand their de-mining operations to be able to increase productivity and to "work ahead" by conducting assessments and technical surveys to identify low-risk areas where people can return immediately, even as the much slower mine clearing operations are taking place in other areas.

-- To expand operations will require better planning, including a returns strategy and a supporting de-mining strategy on the part of the GSL, as well as significant donor resources.

-- Given the random mining by the LTTE in the North and the overall lack of information about minefields, well-funded de-mining operations may still take 3 - 5 years before most IDPs are able to return home. This makes it all the more imperative that the Government articulate a returns/resettlement policy/strategy, against which de-mining agencies can prepare work plans and donors can justify funding levels.

-- If the Rice Bowl is an indicator, much of the infrastructure of the North appears to have been destroyed. With their first access to restricted areas, de-mining agencies have an excellent perspective on reconstruction needs, which planners and funders can use to develop localized returns activities and to allocate resources. As part of its de-mining task order dossiers, FSD already constructs accurate maps of roads, houses and public building, as well as paddy fields, tanks, and other livelihoods locations. MAG is willing to do the same.

-- De-mining operations will be expensive. However, the opportunity cost of not accelerating de-mining and investing more funds is the ongoing provision of costly relief assistance (such as food aid) to IDPs in camps.

MOORE